

The Intouchables

“The Intouchables” is a feel-good, bonding story about a severely handicapped man and his African caretaker. Based on a true story, the film has become the second biggest box office earner ever among French movies, as well as being critically accepted (with nine César nominations).

Rich, aristocratic, 50-something Philippe (François Cluzet) has been left a quadriplegic in a wheelchair after a paragliding accident (he can afford to paraglide) and needs a man servant to help him. Having gone through a whole series of inadequate caretakers, he, somewhat capriciously, settles on the pugnacious but ebullient 35-something Senegalese immigrant Driss (Omar Sy). Philippe selects Driss because he is the only applicant (his applying is, in fact, an accident) who does not pity him or condescend about his condition. Driss, for his part, has been kicked out of his aunt’s flat in the projects and is just happy to settle into a luxurious bedroom suite. No one on Philippe’s staff, including his principal assistant Yvonne (Anne Le Ny) thinks Driss will last a week. They give him two weeks on the job, but he passes the test.

Against all the odds, the two—from vastly different worlds—reach a *modus vivendi* and go well beyond it. Driss, long envious of the classy life, opts for the sports car to drive Philippe around instead of the specially equipped van—and the older man accepts it. Driss openly asks blunt questions, and Philippe answers them, grateful for his genuine interest. They also test each others’ limits, as when Philippe organizes an occasion where Driss can try the former’s passion, paragliding, while Driss, worried about Philippe’s love life, helps arrange a meeting with a female pen pal. The vast cross-cultural disparity allows for moments of understanding (such as an acceptance of each other’s musical tastes), and of humor (like beating the cops on a speeding rap).

From a skeptical perspective, “The Intouchables” (the title is the same in French) could be seen as another replay of the “Noble Savage” theme or the black servant/white master routine, but the film skirts these potential clichés because of the charismatic interaction of its two lead performers and because of the deft touch its writer/director team, Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache, is able to sustain.

François Cluzet (last seen by American audiences in the thriller “Tell No One”) is appropriately cool but also nicely droll as the patrician Philippe, a man of power who has difficulty accepting help. The actor has considerable ease and is able to fully personify his character even if he can “act” only with his head. Omar Sy first gives off vibes of Eddie Murphy in “Trading Places,” yet he makes his street-wise Driss more than a stereotype. His naiveté is winning, but he is also able to read people well and sense their essence. And he has an truly explosive smile.

Sy received the César for the Best Actor of 2011 in a French film, winning over his co-star Cluzet. He also won over Jean Dujardin from “The Artist” (who took home Hollywood’s Oscar this year). Sy and Cluzet form an Odd Couple worth checking out. (*The film is not rated and runs 112 min.*)

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